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THE HISTORICAL  
AND THE  
ETERNAL CHRIST

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W. S. URQUHART, D.Phil.







THE HISTORICAL AND THE  
ETERNAL CHRIST

EDINBURGH  
PRINTED BY JOSEPH LEIGHTON  
130 GEORGE STREET

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EDINBURGH  
MACNIVEN & WALLACE, 138 PRINCES STREET

1915

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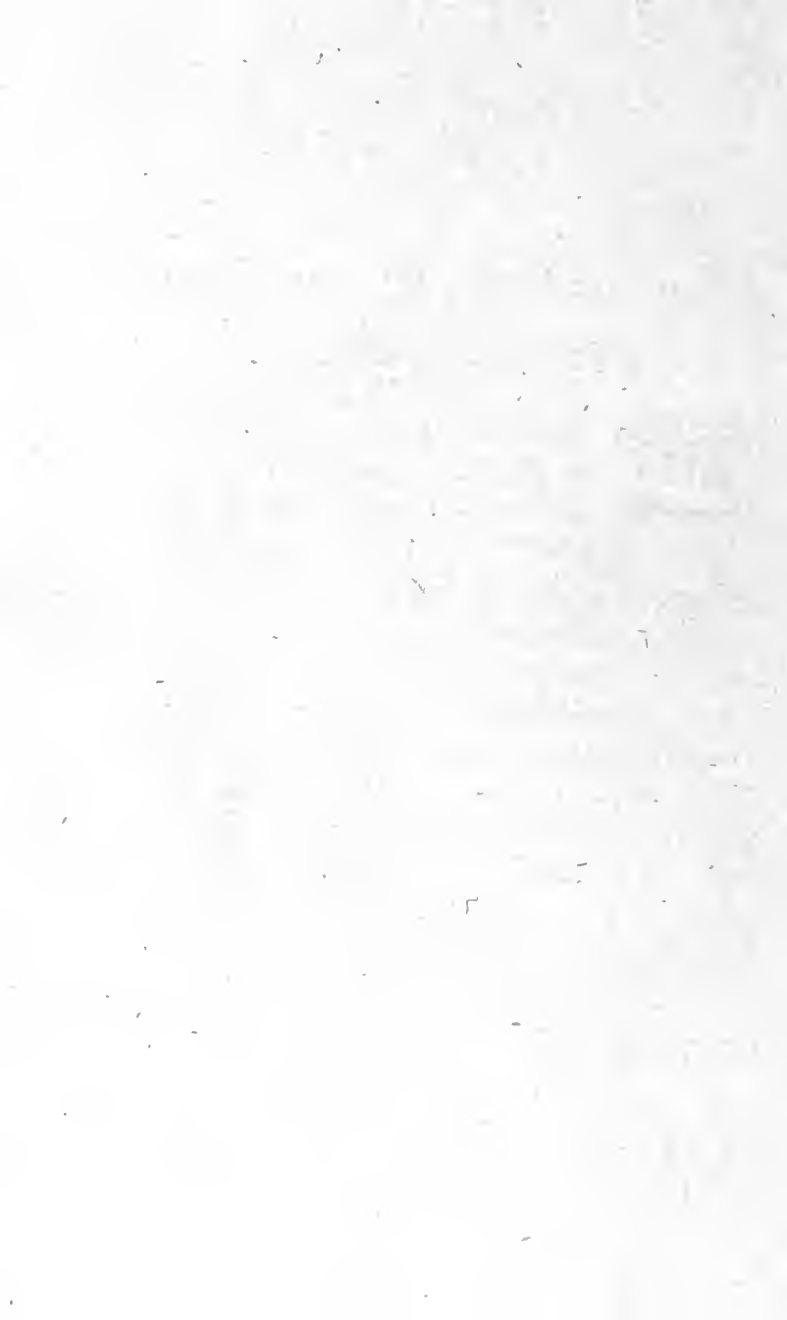
## P R E F A C E.

THIS short discussion of the relation of Christianity to its historical basis originally formed one of a series of lectures delivered in the Scottish Churches College, Calcutta, and intended for an educated Indian audience. I should not have entertained the idea of publishing the lecture in its present form, had it not been for the urgency of a Bengali friend, Mr. G. C. Ghosh, of Calcutta, who also generously insisted on defraying any expenses incurred in publication. I desire to offer my sincerest thanks to Mr. Ghosh for his kindness, and to express the hope that the thoughts here presented may be of some slight use to any who are reflecting upon a problem of such vital importance for the Christian faith.

W. S. URQUHART.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES COLLEGE, CALCUTTA,

1915.



## THE HISTORICAL AND THE ETERNAL CHRIST \*

**I**F there is one topic upon which all who are assembled in this hall to-night are disposed to agree, it would be, I think, the outstanding value of Jesus Christ as the teacher and exemplar of morality. You are all inclined to accord to Him a leading place in the company of the world's religious teachers, and you confess that your souls are deeply impressed by the transcendent beauty of His teaching upon the closeness and completeness of the kinship between God and man and upon the essential

\* One of a series of lectures in the Scottish Churches College Hall, Calcutta, on "The Message of Christianity of the Modern World."

## The Historical and

brotherhood of the human race. These truths, you say, having been clearly enunciated and faithfully practised by Christ, have passed into the eternal and inalienable possession of the human race. And, in thus confessing the allegiance of your spirits, you unite with a countless multitude of men, east and west, north and south, whose souls are alive and are maintained in life by thoughts of spiritual things such as those associated with the name and with the memory of Jesus of Nazareth. You join in this adherence not only with your fellows of the present day but with the religious teachers whom, in the past, India—and, indeed, the whole world—has learned to reverence. If here in Calcutta, *e.g.*, we turn our thoughts back to the state of matters towards the beginning of last century, what do we find? We find the great Rajah Ram Mohan Roy, whose memory

## the Eternal Christ

ought to be especially cherished in this hall,—associated as it is with the name of one of the closest of his European friends—we find him calling Jesus the “Founder of truth and of true religion.” “A being in which dwelt all truth.” “Our spiritual Lord and King.” Nearer our own times, Keshub Chunder Sen speaks of his “profound reverence for the lofty ideal of moral truth which Christ taught and lived”; of Christ as “illuminating by His wisdom a dark and ruined world”; and his enthusiasm for the message of Christ reaches its climax in the cry, “None but Jesus, none but Jesus ever deserved this bright, this precious diadem of India.”

But it must be confessed that, along with this enthusiastic devotion to the teaching of Christ,—to the spirit of what some are pleased to call the eternal Christ, there goes a certain amount of opposition to the claim that

## The Historical and

the religion of Christ has rested and must ever rest upon an historical basis. These opponents set themselves up as more liberal religious thinkers than orthodox Christians. They contend that spiritual value and historical basis are mutually exclusive, that the historical is but the earthen vessel which must be broken up and cast away in order that the spiritual truth and treasure may be fully revealed. They say that by emphasising the historical we are limiting the universal teaching of Christ to a particular period and to a particular section of the human race and are thus defeating the very purpose of Christ Himself. They urge that Christ would have been the very last to claim that His own historical individuality should dominate for all time the religion which He founded. His utter unselfishness and His intense desire for identification with God would have made

## the Eternal Christ

him long for the abandonment of limits of time and place and the absorption of His personality in the eternal being and purposes of God.

This sense of a contrast between the eternal and the historical receives classical expression in the philosophy of the late Thomas Hill Green. He says, "We do wrong to Christianity in making it depend on a past event, and in identifying it with the creed of a certain age or with a visible society established at a certain time. What we thus seem to gain in definiteness, we lose in permanence of conviction; for importunate inquiry will show us that the event can only be approached through a series of fluctuating interpretations of it, beyond which its original nature cannot be clearly ascertained: that the visible church of one age is never essentially the same as that of the next; that it is only in word, or to the

## The Historical and

intellectually dead, that the creed of the present is the same as the creed of the past." With the second and third of these contentions — that no visible society and no formulated creed can be permanent, in its present organisation and structure, — most people would be in thorough agreement, whether Christians or non-Christians. It is to the first of the contentions that I wish specially to direct your attention to-night; but let me, before going further, put it in a little clearer light by another quotation from Green — "The faith which is supposed to be demanded of us as Christians involves two elements, which, to say the least, are wholly different; on the one side a certain intellectual assent (to an historical event) which assent we should say could make no difference to the heart or spirit or character which is alone of absolute value in a man; and, on the other side,



## the Eternal Christ

a certain attitude or disposition which belongs distinctively to this inner man and gives us our worth as moral or spiritual beings. The deepening of the conception of faith only brings this *discrepancy* into clearer relief. The more strongly we insist that faith is a personal and conscious relation of the man to God forming the principle of a new life, the more *awkward* becomes its dependence on events supposed to have happened in the past."

You see that this quotation sets forth the antagonism in unmistakable terms and urges the abandonment of the historical for the sake of the spiritual. We shall afterwards have occasion to ask whether the two elements are so different as T. H. Green supposes, but in the meantime we shall address ourselves to the enquiry whether there is not room,—nay not only room, but absolute necessity — for both these

## The Historical and

elements in the highest religious faith—the historical element and the spiritual. It is impossible to withhold a considerable degree of admiration from thinkers like T. H. Green and other like-minded men. It is impossible not to revere them for the spirituality of their intentions and the nobility of their lives and to sympathise with them in their desire to dissociate inward and spiritual religion from the investigations of the dry-as-dust historians. In particular, it is impossible not to echo the demand that whatever else the Christian religion may be it must include a re-enacting in the hearts of the believer of the truths set forth in the historical facts. But at the same time, it is also impossible not to share the fear expressed even by T. H. Green himself that his creed will suffice only for the few elect, and for them only when reason is strong and the temper calm.

## the Eternal Christ

Those who uphold the eternal or ideal teaching of Christ at the expense of the historical make two claims. Some claim to be giving a true interpretation of Christianity, — far truer at least than that of its accredited exponents. Others forego this claim—say frankly that they do not care whether they interpret Christianity or not. They are concerned to state the demands of the religious consciousness in general, and to point out that these demands can be satisfied only by a religion far wider and far more independent of the historical than Christianity is. They confess that this kind of religion may not yet have been manifested, but they have faith in the future, and they hold that any permanent reliance upon the historical facts at the basis of Christianity, is simply a dogma of religious monopolists and an obstacle in the way of the establishment of true universal religion.

## The Historical and

It is with this contention that I shall have more particularly to deal, but first of all let me say a few words about the first contention, viz., that exclusive adherence to the eternal Christ is the truer interpretation of Christianity itself. Is it not a fair request that those who claim to interpret a religion should consider the intention of the Founder of that religion and the conditions under which it was first established? We have seen that the argument has been put forward that the unselfishness and religious devotion of Christ Himself would have prevented any desire for the continuance of His personal influence. He was simply the noblest of the prophets and, having delivered his God-given message to the world, was content to disappear. But what are the facts? If Christ had wished to secure simply the permanence of His religious message the method which

## the Eternal Christ

He took for accomplishing this was one doomed to failure. Any mere teacher would have prepared His disciples' minds for the calamity of His death, but would have told them that this was of no consequence so long as His teaching remained. Thus they would not have been disheartened and utterly at a loss when the calamity came upon them. They would have stifled their natural sorrow by the thought that at least they possessed the teaching of their Master, and could make that teaching more widely known. But what do you find? Christ never gave His disciples any warning of this kind. Throughout His life He taught them to look upon Himself and not His teaching as the centre of their faith. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." "Come unto Me." And when, little by little and as they were able to bear it, He revealed to them the sad

## The Historical and

prospect of His approaching death, He did not comfort them in the way I have indicated above. Rather He told them and showed them in His historical manifestation that His personality would still be central, that He would be with them even to the end of the world.

I know it is contended by some that these stories of the appearances of Christ after the resurrection and all His sayings about the permanence of His personality are simply imaginations of a later age,—that, after the doctrines taught by Christ were firmly established these tales were invented to give greater weight to the doctrines. But this seems to me one of the strangest examples of circular reasoning which the history of thought has ever seen. It is like the old story which tells us that the world is supported on the back of an elephant, and then, when a question is put as to the support of the elephant, adds that it is supported

## the Eternal Christ

on the surface of the world. For whence came this body of thought or doctrine which is supposed to have created the alleged historical fact of the continuance of Christ's personality? Could it have come from the ideas in the minds of the disciples as to the permanence of Christ's teaching? As I have already shown, they had no such ideas. They were an utterly disappointed, disheartened, broken body of men, quite incapable of originating any such body of ideas. What explains the wonderful change—that in a few short months we find them compassing land and sea, preaching, not so much the teaching of Christ as the *fact* of Christ, with a strength of conviction which was able to stand the extremes of persecution and the disapproval of the whole civilised world? Do not all the canons of historical criticism demand that we should assign a sufficient cause for so great an event?

## The Historical and

—and no cause seems sufficient except the occurrence of the fact itself. It was here that the faith of the early disciples centred, and here only, they being such men as they were, that it *could* have centred. And it is here that the beliefs of men to whom Christ has meant much all down through the ages, have also centred. It is here that my own faith centres, for Christ is to me not only a teacher but the greatest *fact* that the history of the world has ever known. This fact has eternal significance, not simply because it is a symbol of eternal truth but because, *as a fact*, it is eternal truth.

Let us turn now to the other class of people,—the more straightforward—who acknowledge that for Christianity the fact of Christ's historical manifestation is all important, but who argue that just for this very reason Christianity cannot be the final religion of the world



## the Eternal Christ

and must give place to a religion of ideas, based on reason alone and freed altogether from the trammels of the historical. Over and over again it has been contended that the only religion which can claim to be eternal is one which rises far superior to any particular origin and dwells in the region of abstract ideas and vague mystical feeling. But however often such a religion has been promulgated, it has never succeeded in being the religion of any except a select few, and even these have confessed that somehow or other it does not satisfy the full demands of their spirits. Have we not here in India seen over and over again the swing of the pendulum from the religion which consists chiefly in cold abstract philosophy to the religion that appeals to the craving of the devotee for a warm, human, actual personality whom he can fall down and worship. Listen to the cry of the poet Tulsidas

## The Historical and

in his *Ramayana*. "The saint gave the fullest possible instruction, but the worship of the impersonal laid no hold upon my heart. Again I cried bowing my head at his feet, 'Tell me, Holy Father, how to worship the incarnate. Devotion to Rama, oh, wisest of sages, is like the element of water, and my soul, which is as it were a fish, how can it exist without it? When I have seen my fill of the Lord, then I will listen to your sermon on the unembodied?' Again the saint discoursed of the incomparable Hari, and, demolishing the dogma of the incarnation, expounded him as altogether passionless. But I rejected the theory of the abstract and with much obstinacy insisted upon his concrete manifestation. The religion of the impersonal did not satisfy me. I felt an overpowering devotion towards an incarnation of the Supreme."

Is not this "overpowering devotion"

## the Eternal Christ

just a testimony to the need of the human heart for a factual, historical basis in religion? No philosophy of religion can remain entirely in the region of the abstract. Did I say, "no philosophy of religion?"—I might widen my statement and say that no philosophy at all can remain in this rarified atmosphere. Even the most abstract thinkers of all—mathematicians—have to come down—to borrow an illustration recently used,—to the plain prosaic fact that three barley corns give them the standard of measurement of an inch. All thinkers have to begin with the fact of their own experience, with the fact of their personality, before they can even begin to philosophise and, however they may struggle, they cannot get away from this fact any more than a man can jump off his own shadow.

Why then should it be so difficult, especially here in India, to accept the

## The Historical and

value of the historical? I cannot help seeing in this difficulty the effect of the prevalent abstract philosophy, especially of the philosophy of the Vedanta, with its placing of illusion at the heart of things, with its separation between God as He is in Himself and God as manifested, with its view of history as a mere catalogue of examples, with its despising of the actualities of life as exclusive of the realities of the spiritual world. History, on this theory, seems but a poor thing, a series of examples merely, a scroll that unfolds and is folded up again at the end of the age, when all things shall begin again, repeat themselves and again be re-absorbed—for ever and for ever. With such a view of history there is no place, of course, for the religious value of the historical, no place for a true theory of incarnation.

Ah, it is said, you surely forget that

## the Eternal Christ

nowhere has the theory of incarnations been so universal as in India. Have we not incarnations without number? Undoubtedly, but it is just their number that is the difficulty, and it is this which prevents them, however beautiful they may be, from being of true religious value. It is a noble thought that God incarnates Himself over and over again whenever iniquity abounds and oppression triumphs, but it is not a thought which gives the highest value to the historical. If we are to give religious value to the historical we must be able to find purpose in history. And purpose excludes the possibility of repeated incarnations. Let me illustrate my meaning by a crude illustration. When we look round on our fellow men, whom do we estimate most highly? Surely not those who do the same thing over and over again. This is the characteristic of children at play or of people who ought to have

## The Historical and

grown up but who have remained at the intellectual level of children. Those who take life seriously do not do the same things over and over again. When they do anything, they try to do it so perfectly that it will not have to be repeated, and every succeeding stage is an improvement on what has preceded. Surely we can apply this criterion of the worth of human action to God and His historical manifestation in history. Surely we do little honour to God if we think of Him as treating history as children would treat their playthings, or as an unsatisfactory workman who is set to do over again what he is already supposed to have done. Surely we pay Him greater honour, nay the only possible honour due to the Divine, if we think of Him as trusting Himself to a real process in history or, in other words, working out a purpose in history.

And when we consider the world as

## the Eternal Christ

a whole—the world of humanity as well as the world of nature, and when also we consider the nature of humanity on the one hand, and the love of God on the other, it seems to me that we can gain some insight into the character of this revelation. In committing an original trust to man, in deciding to create creative spirits, God,—if we may say it without irreverence—took certain risks, and, in the course of development, the seriousness of these risks has been manifested over and over again in the individual soul and in humanity as a whole. Man received the gift of freedom of choice, but along with this gift he also received the power of choosing evil rather than good. And, in face of the facts of the world, he cannot be said to have refrained from exercising this gift. We cannot deny the fact of sin—that man has often gone so far astray that the very power of return seems to have

## The Historical and

been lost to him. Was God to leave the matter thus? Was He to provide no redeemer? If we have any belief in the fatherhood of God,—and this is surely one of the truths proclaimed by Christ which we would all allow to be eternal—we cannot answer this question in the affirmative. If we are to carry out to its logical conclusion the thought of the love and fatherhood of God, it seems to me impossible to say that this love is fully exercised if the world is left in the chaos and confusion caused by sin. The love of God to the world must be not only that which gives reality to the world process; it must also bring salvation. God has entrusted men with power which they often use to wander away from Him, but He does not leave them to their wanderings and without a care for their fate. He does not by any means recall the gift of freedom which He has bestowed, but He retains the right to



## the Eternal Christ

strengthen by additional bonds the connection between human beings and Himself. All down through the ages God has provided suggestions of the way in which men may return to Himself, and, if we keep fast hold of the idea of purpose, we must also believe that these suggestions will gradually grow in fulness and in adaptability to the various needs of human nature. Thus it seems to me a truth of the highest philosophical and religious importance that "God who at sundry times and divers manners spake in times past unto our fathers by the prophets," should, when the fulness of time, was come speak unto us by His Son. This is the outcome of the love of God, the love with which He "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoso believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The divine Love had to come into the world, not in theory

## The Historical and

only but in fact, in the unique consciousness of the Christ who came not merely to think evil out of existence, but to struggle with it in its intensest form, overwhelm the forces of despair and transform them into the strength of victory.

But, you may say, even if we grant that the revelation of God's redeeming love culminated in the appearance of Christ in the world—that no equally full revelation had been seen in the world before, is not this manifestation after all an historical fact, and, as such, is it not an affair of the past only? Is it not a sign of narrowness of mind to say that we cannot go beyond this, that we must for ever look backwards instead of forwards? Can we not give full value to the historical revelation of Christ and yet demand that we must advance beyond Him? Does not your claim that there is an increasing purpose in history demand this? Must we not ever

## the Eternal Christ

advance and advance beyond the historical Christ, so that it is a mistake to say that this is eternal? This is a justifiable argument and we must consider it carefully.

But first of all let me recur to a remark in the quotation from T. H. Green. He implies that the belief in historical data connected with Christ and His resurrection is just like belief in a bare historical fact such as that Cæsar was murdered on a certain day in March. I do not think that this contention can be supported. There *are* bare historical facts, but there are also facts which, though they are intensely historical, are not barely historical. Of the latter kind are facts connected with the history of a personality. Let us take an example. Take any one of your friends, preferably one whom you admire and even reverence. Is he not a historical fact, but yet for his appreciation do you not require something more than a mere ability to

## The Historical and

apprehend his age, the date which you first knew him, the length of your acquaintanceship and so on? Do you not bring to your appreciation of him all the powers of your soul, your desire for intellectual companionship, your longing for moral betterment? In short, does he not become a moral fact to you just because you are a moral personality. This fact of his personality is a fact of history, but yet its effect upon you is built into the very fibre of your being and remains with you as long as you remain. And if your appreciation of him rises to a great height, does not the power of his personality seem to you to stretch forward indefinitely into the future and to become one of the unchangeable things of the world? So, in still greater degree, is it with the fact of Christ. We can understand Him aright only if we appreciate Him with all the powers of our being. But I

## the Eternal Christ

venture to say that if we go to Him with a sincere desire to get the fulness of meaning out of this historical fact we shall see that the fact, while remaining historical, becomes also eternal. Within the bounds of the purpose for which Christ came, nothing can seem to us more perfect. If we wish to discover, not in theory only, but in reality, the complete God-man, then in Christ we have the limit of perfection and can conceive of nothing beyond. This fact of Christ has a transcendent importance which stretches forward into the indefinite future. Intensively, then Christ in His historical manifestation is the culmination, and those who know Him best can conceive of no room for anything beyond.

But then you ask again, is there no room for progress? Assuredly there is, but, as I might put it, the progress is not intensive, but extensive. There is

## The Historical and

no room and no need for a higher manifestation historically of the perfect, but Christ did not come to suffer and die in order to overcome the forces of evil for Himself alone. He came to plant a new divine power in the earth which would be for all humanity. Christ glories in the title of the elder brother of the race. He came to show men not only how evil was actually conquered, but how it could be conquered in the lives of his brethren of mankind. What He had won, they also might win, where He had gone they also might go. Sin was no longer to be an impassable barrier between man and God. Christ had taken upon Himself the burden of the sorrow of sin and had returned through that sorrow to union with God so that in every human heart in which that sorrow should be awakened there might also be peace and a consciousness of a renewed communion with God. God

## the Eternal Christ

was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, and through Christ the love of God streams forth to the utmost confines of humanity, giving to every man the power to return and become a son of God in the fullest sense, holding out the promise of abundance of life in complete harmony and communion with God.

Perhaps a little symbolism may make my meaning clearer. God might be represented as the centre of a circle and humanity as the outer circle of ever-widening circumference. In the course of the ages the lines which run from the centre to the circumference have grown faint. So, through the power of the life and death of Christ, God has, as it were, described an inner circle. Between the centre in God and this inner circle the lines of connection are strong and clear. From the centre we may pass easily to the circumference and back again to the centre. And the hope that is set before

## The Historical and

us, the progress which we look for, is that the same closeness of connection which exists between the centre and the inner circle will be found between the outer circle and the centre as well.

But the lines of connection between humanity and God will ever run through the inner circle of the historical Christ, who, though historical, remains eternal because in Him dwelleth all the fulness of God. We need the historical fact of Christ and we need the eternal Christ. My purpose this evening has been to show that these are not two different Christs but one and the same. If we seek to separate between the two we run the risk of being either dry-as-dust historical pedants, busying ourselves about the dates and places of Christ's earthly life, or we fall into the opposite danger of putting a philosophy in the place of a religion. In neither extreme is there safety or religious satisfaction.



## the Eternal Christ

Here in this country we are not much in danger of the first extreme, but I think we are in danger of the second. We are attracted easily, more easily perhaps than most people, by the fascination of beautiful ideas. This is good, but we need more than ideas. Ideas, after all, are the property of the few and religion must be the property of the many. Are we to be content with a religion from which the majority of our fellows are shut out, simply because they have not been trained in the power of formulating and manipulating abstract ideas? Surely not. Surely we will be less selfish in our religion. And what about those of us who are familiar with these beautiful ideas, and are ready, it may be, to put the ideas of Christ in the foremost rank? Are they sufficient for us? Sometimes we may be tempted to think so, when everything is going well with us and temptation is distant. But what about us—

## The Historical and

“When our light is low  
When the blood creeps and the nerves prick  
And tingle and the heart is sick.  
And all the wheels of being slow.”

What about us then? Do we not need more than ideas of the right and the wrong? Ask your own consciences. Do you not confess that over and over again you have known perfectly well what was right? You have had most beautiful ideas about it, but yet you have not done it! And the burden of these past failures is an intolerable load. For relief do we not need more than ideas? Do we not need a person, just such a person as will stretch down the love of God into the actual life of our humanity, just such a person as Christ was, who can tell us not only what duty is but give us the power to do it. Every person is an historical fact. You and I are persons, and you and I are facts. We seem to ourselves more real than anything besides, but I tell you to-

## the Eternal Christ

night of another fact, the fact of Christ, who is also real to me, more real than anything besides. I could wish that all of you would bend in contemplation of this fact as we have it,—as we have Him—in the pages of history. And I can promise that to every sincere heart there will come the consciousness that this fact is much wider, is much greater than the bounds of space and time, that while it comes near to us here in earth, it may also lift our souls into communion with God in heaven.

Long long ago a young man left his home and went into a distant land. As he journeyed through the desert, the darkness came upon him. And as he slept he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reaching to heaven, and “behold the angels of God ascending and descending upon it.” Long years afterwards Christ revived this story from the records of the past. When Nathanael came to Him and confessed the

## The Historical and Eternal Christ

beginning of his faith, Christ said to him, "Hereafter thou shalt see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." Surely this is a true symbol of the worth of Christ for man. His life is the ladder which reaches from earth to heaven. The foot of the ladder rests firmly upon the historical, but the top of it reaches into the eternal, and, as you cannot separate the two ends of the ladder from one another, so you cannot separate the historical from the eternal in the life of Christ. And it is by means of this life, at once historical and eternal, at once on earth and in heaven, that the angels of God—the true thoughts, the fervent desires after God, the noble purposes—may descend upon our lives and remain with us for ever and for ever.

"Christ is the end, for Christ *was* the beginning.  
Christ the beginning for the end *is* Christ."



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